EducationWeek® | SPOTLIGHT®

2026

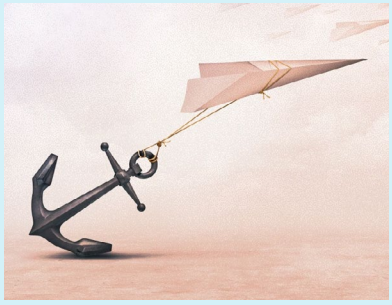
From Decoding to Growth: Every Student's Journey Forward

Eglė Plytnikaitė for Education Week

Page 4

EDITOR'S NOTE

This Spotlight captures what students need to become confident, capable readers, beginning with strong **foundations in decoding** and other early skills, and continuing with the **ongoing development of knowledge, language, and stamina.** Districts serving English learners are blending the science of reading with **targeted language support.** Researchers are offering guidance on effective time allocation for foundational skills and **strategies for making word problems and complex texts more accessible.** At the upper grades, experts emphasize **disciplinary literacy** and **targeted support for older struggling readers.** Taken together, this Spotlight offers comprehensive insights into literacy that support every learner's path from early skill building to sustained academic growth.



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Page 16

OPINION

Published October 28, 2025

How One District Approaches the 'Science of Reading' With English Learners

By Sarah Schwartz

Noah Devereaux for Education Week

First grader Aizlynn Castillo works on an assignment in Diana Oviedo-Holguin's English-learner class at Heritage Elementary School in San Antonio. The school district has embraced the "science of reading" and is applying it to instruction for English learners and in dual-language programs.

Almost 1 in 4 students are enrolled in a dual-language, Spanish-English program in the Southside schools in San Antonio.

So when the district embraced the "science of reading," it prioritized figuring out how new practices could work in Spanish—and how instruction could best support students learning a new language.

"If we're going to do this for our general education classrooms, then we're going to do it for dual language," said Alejandra Ramirez, the elementary reading coordinator in the district, in an Oct. 16 Education Week virtual event.

In the national science of reading movement, which aims to bring elementary reading instruction in line with evidence-based practices, Southside Independent school district stands out.

While 45 states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation mandating schools take an evidence-based approach to teaching reading, only 10 discuss the needs of English learners in depth, according to a 2023 analysis from the Shanker Institute.

Meanwhile, some advocates and researchers who work in English-learner education have waged a fierce battle against the science of reading movement, arguing that what they perceive as too much focus on phonics is crowding out the focus on spoken language development that English learners need. Reading researchers, in turn, have countered that all students, regardless of their native language, need to be taught how written letters correspond to spoken sounds.

In 2024, the advocacy group the National Committee for Effective Literacy published a report analyzing interviews with 77 educators of multilingual students in states implementing science of reading legislation. The report argued that adoption of these policies "often reduces opportunities for students to learn."

In Southside, though, the district's English/language arts and dual-language teams have worked together with the goal that changes to reading instruction should benefit all students. Read on for three of the guiding principles they shared at Education Week's event.

1. All students can benefit from explicit instruction in how to read words

In Southside's elementary schools, half of K-2 students' 135-minute literacy block is devoted to foundational-skills instruction, said Ramirez. That's the case in general education reading classes, and in dual-language classrooms—where students are learning to read in Spanish.

In dual-language classrooms, these lessons help students unlock written language. But they also help lay a foundation for students to learn how to read in English, too, said Melissa Martinez, the district's director of bilingual programs.

The letter "A," for example, exists in both languages, but can make many more sounds in English than it can in Spanish. Making that explicit for children can help them avoid confusion, Martinez said.

2. Seek out resources designed for multilingual students

As Southside district leaders have selected Spanish phonics resources, they've gravitated toward programs that were created in Spanish, rather than English programs that have been translated. Ramirez has found that the latter attempt to map English phonics rules onto the Spanish language in a way that doesn't always make sense, or they use Spanish words that would be unfamiliar to beginning readers.

"Someone that speaks Spanish, that has taught how to read in Spanish, needs to develop these products," Ramirez said, in an earlier interview with Education Week.

There are a few programs that meet these criteria, she said, naming Esperanza by the Valley Speech Language and Learning Center, and the Spanish phonics program from independent publisher Estrellita. But the market would benefit from more options designed to teach explicit, systematic decoding in Spanish, in U.S. schools, she said.

"If we want our teachers to implement the

science of reading, to help our students be proficient readers, we need to have people that create these materials for us and for our teachers," Ramirez said.

3. Bilingualism is an asset in building literacy skills

In Southside dual-language classrooms, teachers draw on language, reading, and spelling skills that students learn in Spanish to teach in English—and vice versa.

One place this manifests is in morphology instruction, or teaching students about the meaning of word parts. Because many prefixes and suffixes in both languages are derived from Latin and Greek, they're sometimes the same, or similar. For example, "anti" means against or opposite in English and Spanish.

"In 4th and 5th grade, we focus a lot on prefixes and suffixes, and how do those connect, and how can we transfer what we know in Spanish to what we know in English?" Ramirez said, during the virtual event. Students can further apply that knowledge in other subject-area classes where they have to learn complex, multisyllabic words, Ramirez said.

In a dual-language program, teachers can coordinate instruction to take advantage of these cross-linguistic connections. But even in an English-as-a-second-language program, teachers can draw on the similarities between students' home languages and English.

"Our students don't start from zero," Ramirez said. "They do bring a lot of linguistic skills into the classroom, and we need to home in on them." ■

The Decoding Threshold: A Critical Milestone in Every Reader's Journey

A Guide for Teachers, Specialists, and Education Leaders

Decoding Threshold: What it is and Why it Matters

The decoding threshold—the point at which word reading becomes accurate and automatic—is a pivotal, research-based milestone in a student's reading journey. Until students cross this threshold, their cognitive energy is consumed by figuring out individual words, leaving little capacity for understanding what they read. Research shows that striving readers who have not reached the decoding threshold gain little benefit from comprehension-focused interventions (Wang et al., 2019).

The Two Phases of Reading: Learning to Read and Reading to Learn

Reading development unfolds in two broad phases:

DECODING THRESHOLD

1 Learning to Read

"Wiring the Brain" for Reading

BELOW THE THRESHOLD

Structured Literacy; Robust Decoding Support

In this foundational phase, students are still "wiring the brain" for reading. They need explicit, systematic Structured Literacy instruction across the five key pillars of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. During this phase, instruction emphasizes decoding skills while building vocabulary and comprehension primarily through oral language activities.

2 Reading to Learn

BEYOND THE THRESHOLD

Focus on Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension

Once students can decode most words accurately and automatically, they enter the second phase. Now, reading becomes a tool for thinking, learning, and enjoyment, and the emphasis shifts to vocabulary and comprehension through engagement with text.

The decoding threshold marks the transition between these phases. It is the measurable, research-based point when foundational decoding skills are mastered and automatic, freeing up mental energy for comprehension, vocabulary growth, and knowledge-building.

The Decoding Threshold is Significant

Students BELOW the threshold:

- ✗ Read slowly and with effort
- ✗ May miss out on content and vocabulary growth through engagement with text
- ✗ Often get misidentified as having "comprehension problems" alone

Students ABOVE the threshold:

- ✓ Read with accuracy and greater fluency
- ✓ Can focus on meaning rather than decoding
- ✓ Grow quickly in comprehension and vocabulary

What This Means for Instruction

Knowing whether a student is below or above the decoding threshold helps pinpoint what kind of instruction or intervention is needed.

If a student is BELOW the decoding threshold	If a student is ABOVE the decoding threshold
Structured Literacy with explicit, systematic phonics and decoding instruction	Strategic support in fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension
Decodable and controlled texts for reinforcing practice	Rich, complex texts for knowledge-building and enjoyment
Decodable and controlled texts for reinforcing practice	Close reading, writing, and text-based discussion

Remember: Students at any grade—even middle or high school—may still be below the decoding threshold and need support with foundational skills.

Determining Whether a Student is Below or Above the Decoding Threshold

Educators can look for these indicators that a student may still be BELOW the decoding threshold:

- Labored, inaccurate word reading; slow reading rate
- Avoidance of independent reading
- Stronger comprehension when listening than when reading

Assessment data can confirm:

- Oral reading fluency scores
- Decoding subtests (e.g., nonsense word reading)
- Spelling inventories

For screening, educators may choose to administer the Decoding Threshold Quick Check from EPS Learning.

Moving Forward

Crossing the decoding threshold is more than a developmental milestone—it is a gateway to reading success. When educators identify where students are on their reading journey, they can provide the right instruction at the right time, ensuring every learner becomes a confident, independent reader.

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Published May 05, 2025

The Best Ways to Teach Word Problems So All Students Understand

By Olina Banerji

Word problems try and tell students a story about the math problem in front of them. They are a useful way to connect abstract numbers to concrete situations, so students can learn early on to apply math to solve real-world problems.

The challenge is that the combination of words and numbers can turn into cognitive puzzles, and students need to work multiple levers of their brains to unpack them. These problems can especially be a challenge for English learners or students who struggle to read or have a learning disability. In a nationally representative EdWeek Research Center poll, 29 percent of math teachers said less than a quarter of their English learners can solve word problems on their own.

If students spend all their time trying to understand the words or the context of a problem, they'll struggle to understand which mathematical function to pick. But making word problems too basic or easy, or teaching students specific "hacks" to solve a word problem, doesn't work, either, experts say.

In every word problem, there are three things that students need to do: read and understand the problem's narrative, determine what the problem is asking them to find, and identify one or more math operations to solve it.

Students who are successful problem-solvers think about what they're doing to solve the problem, and how they are doing it. When students are coached to reason through and solve the problem, it helps build their confidence.

Yet in the EdWeek Research Center survey, conducted this spring, about a third of math teachers said it's "very challenging" for them to teach multi-step word problems, and a quarter said it was "somewhat challenging." Fourteen percent said they don't teach this type of word problem.

Here's what the research says about the best ways to teach word problems.

Solving word problems isn't a solo process—teachers should join in

Students shouldn't encounter word problems for the first time in an assessment. Teachers need to bring the right word problems into rotation during lessons and expose students to mathematical language early. It's important for math teachers to have a deep understanding of their students' reading levels, prior knowledge, and cultural background.

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> **"You have to help fill in some of those missing pieces so that students can start solving that problem [and] aren't spending all their time decoding the words."**
>
> **KEVIN DYKEMA**
> Math instructional coach
> Mattawan, Mich.,

Kevin Dykema, a math instructional coach in Mattawan, Mich., said he likes to present a word problem that uses a softball or baseball diamond to teach the Pythagorean theorem. But not all his students know what a softball or baseball diamond looks like, so he draws them a picture.

"You have to help fill in some of those missing pieces so that students can start solving that problem [and] aren't spending all their time decoding the words," he said.

Students need to understand the context and "type" of each word problem. Researchers suggest that teachers should play around with the information provided in the question to get students thinking conceptually about problems.

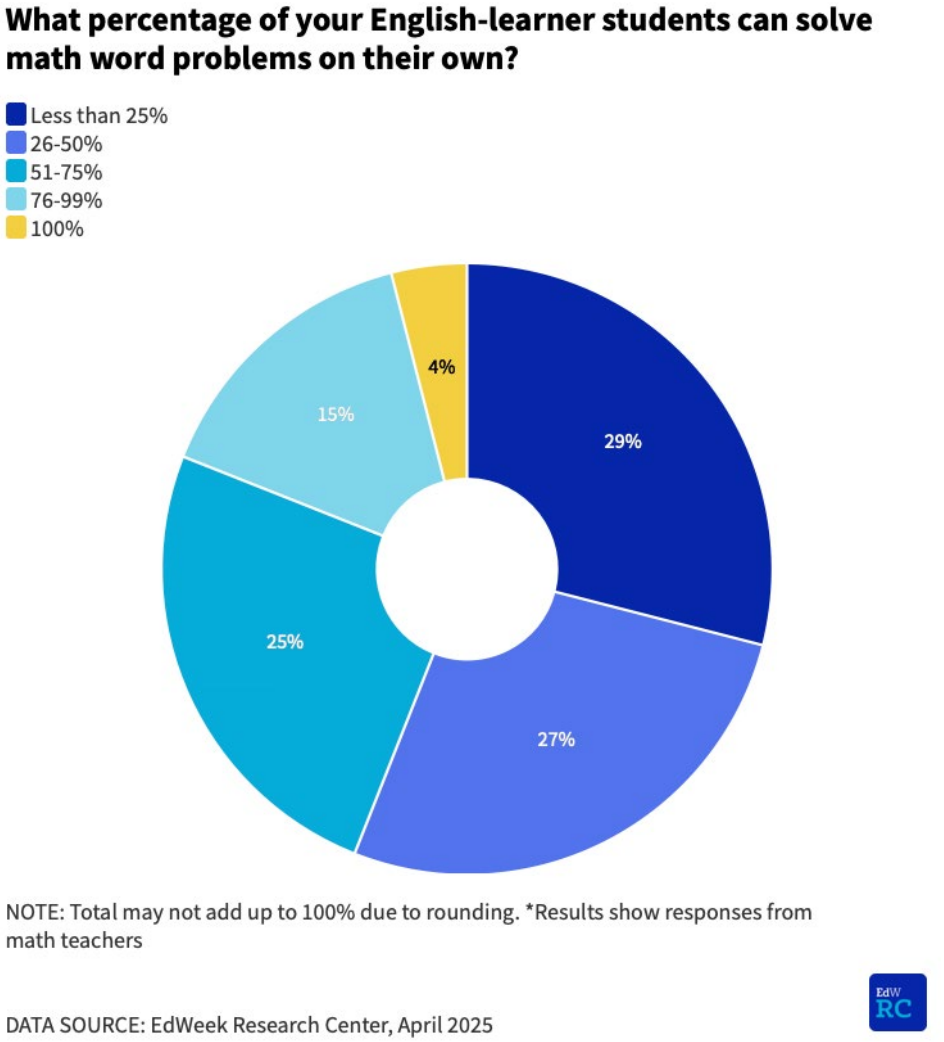
Numberless word problems can be used to do this—a teacher can introduce a problem without any quantities, which compels students to first think about the relationship between the entities in the problem and then the mathematical function they'd choose to solve the question.

A teacher may say, for instance, "Leo has some toy cars. Eric has a few more than Leo. How many cars do they have altogether?" The teacher can then gradually introduce the quantity of cars.

Or teachers can switch between missing quantities in the problem. For instance, students could be asked to solve for c in a+b=c. Then, they could be asked to solve for a or b to test how well they understand the relationship between the different values.

When teachers use "think-aloud" strategies—discussing steps with students as they solve a problem or visualize it—they should talk about why they chose a particular strategy. Research indicates that it's just as important for students to explain their rationale for solving or visualizing the problem as it is to arrive at the right answer. Students should expect to be asked how they solved the problem and be ready to answer.

Teachers should avoid having students



look for keywords, a hack used commonly to connect words with mathematical operations. In the EdWeek Research Center survey, a majority of math teachers—70 percent—said they ask their students to look for keywords "every time" they solve a word problem.

But this hack isn't foolproof, say experts like Dykema. For instance, the word "more" within a word problem may mean students need to add the numbers, but a slight variation, like "how many more," could change the required operation to subtraction. Connecting words to specific strategies won't help students when the context of the problem changes.

Research suggests that getting students to reflect on their strategies will hone their problem-solving skills for higher-level problems, too. Teachers have to prompt this thinking through task lists (identify quantities, draw out the question, find the mathematical operation) and starter questions (What is this problem asking me to find? Have I solved a similar problem before?).

How to help students who struggle to read and comprehend the problem

Students should learn to visually represent different types of word problems in the form of bars, tables, number lines, or schematic diagrams before they jump to solving the equation. This strategy, research indicates, works well for English learners and students with disabilities.

Visualizations help students break down the problem into digestible bits—what do they need to find, and how they can find it? Some visuals work well for specific problems, like strip diagrams for problems that involve comparisons.

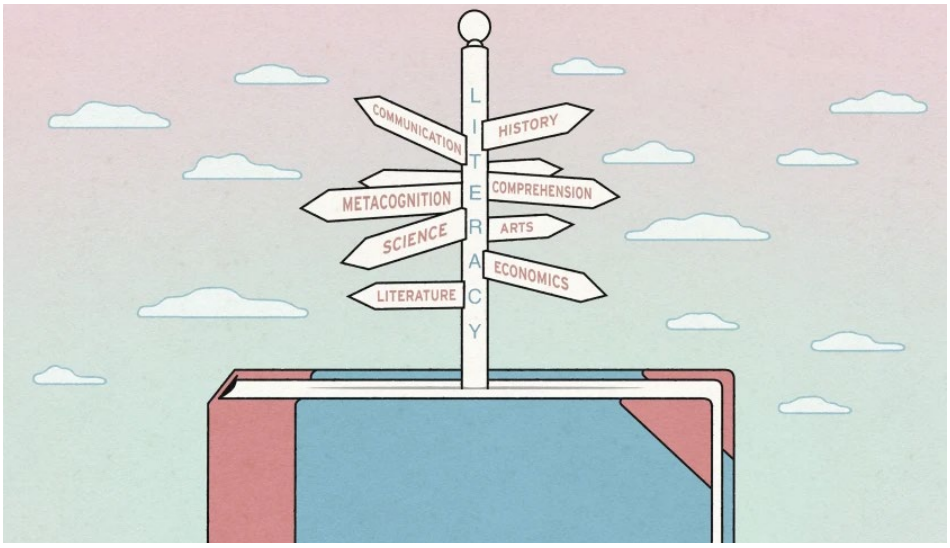
Pro tip: Use a handful of visualizations consistently to explain the word problems, instead of confusing students with too many representations.

Before jumping into a lesson on word problems, assess your students' reading abilities. Experts suggest that teachers work with colleagues who assist English learners or those with disabilities to design their instruction accordingly. However, don't assume that students who are still learning English are unfamiliar with the underlying mathematical concepts, too.

Using "Bet Lines" for English learners can boost their engagement with word problems. Bet Lines are a discourse strategy in which teachers read half a question and then wait for students to chime in with what they think happens next.

For instance, a teacher may read out, "Five cats went to the playground. What do you think happens next?" Students could respond by adding or subtracting cats from this equation. The Bet Lines strategy, experts say, will help build a student's mathematical reasoning. ■

Additional Resource
View this article's charts



Noah Devereaux for Education Week

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What Is Disciplinary Literacy?

By Stephen Sawchuk

Would you read Anna Karenina the same way you'd digest a new article on respiratory illnesses in "Science"? The answer feels obvious, even if the concept used to describe that difference—"disciplinary literacy"—sounds wonky.

Disciplinary literacy goes beyond the idea of reading widely in the content areas and their own vocabularies. It underscores that the tools one uses when conducting a literary analysis of Levin's character development is different from those one would use to peruse a technical study on COVID-19. But the connection to the general goal of skilled reading is clear: Learning how to read in different disciplines can enhance the content knowledge that underlies reading comprehension.

Timothy Shanahan, who sat on the 2000 National Reading Panel and later helped develop the concept of disciplinary literacy, took questions from EdWeek on how it fits into K-12 schools' larger aims on reading.

His responses have been edited for length and clarity.

How would you distinguish between content-area literacy and disciplinary literacy?

Content-area literacy is an older idea, and it basically came about in the 1940s and kind of evolved from there. But, the basic idea of it was that you could teach kids to read their textbooks in the various fields if you just taught general reading ability, if you built their vocabulary, if you taught them to use a dictionary, if you taught them to summarize text and so on and so forth. The whole point of it was how do you improve kids' reading achievement when they're no longer getting reading classes. So the social studies teacher could teach reading, which basically just meant they'd have them read text and comprehend it, and you'd teach them some study skills and things like that. It got a lot of pushback on that from math teachers and science teachers and history teachers who went, you know, my job is to teach math and science and history.

Disciplinary literacy is a newer idea, and it doesn't come out of the reading field specifically. It originally came out of science and social studies, and essentially it's a recognition that each field has a different body of text and different types of text that readers have to read, and that readers really have to have a different stance. Reading history is very different than reading literature, [which] is very different than reading science, and so on. And so the notion is if you actually want to learn science and understand science, then you have to read more like a scientist.

You have to approach the text in the way that a historian would, the way that a mathematician would, or a literary critic. And that means you have to have some understanding of how research is done in those fields, how knowledge is created. You have to have some of how it's communicated and how that differs from how other fields do it. And you have to have a set of strategies and approaches that actually allow you to successfully take on the books in your field, the books and articles and all the kinds of texts in your field.

How has the research about disciplinary literacy advanced over the last 20 years?

You know, there'd been people doing research on this really since the late 1980s. But some work that my wife and I did really kind of crystallized it, it pulled it together. We had actually looked at how people read science and history and mathematics, how the experts do it and the notion was that you needed to build curricula out of that. And what's happened since that time is there certainly have been attempts to build such curricula, especially in history, but also in some of the other fields. And there have been a handful of studies now that are really instructional studies: Can you teach that? Does it make any difference? Does it change anything for the kids?

And in fact, the studies that have been done so far are hopeful, they suggest that kids really do take it on. That kids are really interested in knowing what it is adults are doing; you know, it's all kind of secret, and so instruction that lets teenagers in on it, they eat that up and it does improve their reading ability and their ability to acquire knowledge in those fields.

And so not surprisingly, you don't get the same kind of pushback from teachers. [If] you tell a social studies teacher, "Your job is to teach reading and to teach history," they're out. If the notion is, "You guys read texts differently than other people, and you've got to let kids in on that," ... they buy into that pretty easily. ... That person who's really committed to science or history, the notion of letting kids in and letting them apprentice in their field, that's exciting to them; that's a real turn on.

How would you describe what happens in elementary and lower secondary as contributing to disciplinary literacy?

First of all, there's just the basic kinds of reading skills that everybody needs. You have to be able to decode, you have to be able to read text, you have to have basic comprehension skills. And certainly elementary schools, that's an important part of what they do. And

"If you have history text that isn't just a series of facts, but is starting to deal with issues that there are historical disagreements on, that gets really interesting. And that could be in 5th grade."

TIMOTHY SHANAHAN

we don't want to lose sight of that. A second aspect of what's important is knowledge. Reading comprehension is at least partially using what you know to make sense of the information. And it's really never too early. Even preschoolers are interested in scientific concepts, [like] why does that ball fall on the floor. And so we don't want to lose those social studies lessons and science lessons and arts lessons in the elementary school, because that gives kids a base.

When should they start actually looking at text as being disciplinary? Certainly not at the beginning. We know that because anyone who takes a 2nd grade content text and compares them, they're very similar: The formats, the layouts, the kind of information they share, the way they share the information is very consistent. But that starts to change as you move through the grades.

And some programs and some bodies of texts do that more quickly, but by the time you're in middle school, frankly, a science text and a social studies text are really different, they're presenting very different information. They're using tables and charts very differently and so on and so forth. ... When you actually have texts that reflect how people think in the field, you can start doing it. And so it really can begin in certainly by the upper elementary grades.

If you have history text that isn't just a series of facts, but is starting to deal with issues that there are historical disagreements on, that gets really interesting. And that could be in 5th grade.

To your point, I have seen some really great history materials from maybe grade five and up. But do we have those materials for science? I mean, you're not going give kids "The Lancet."

There's a little bit, but not as much as there has been in social studies. The scientific community has certainly embraced these ideas, but more slowly. There are things that we could be easily doing in upper elementary grades with some of the graphic information that's provided in a science book and the charts and tables.

One of the things I learned in doing the work [was] when you're dealing with chemists and hard science folks, I think they're much more aware of how this stuff works, to tell you the truth. They've got a longer history of it. And one of the things that they shared with us was that in science, you're not dealing with points of view like you are in history; you're trying to describe something about the natural world. It's something real. It's not a fiction. This isn't the creation you do in literature and in mathematics. This is a real thing, and language is inadequate for describing it. And so you try to put it into words, but you also try to do it graphically.

Now, we don't get a lot of the mathematical representation in elementary [science], but you definitely get the graphic, you definitely get the verbal. And so even just teaching kids how to put together this chart with what the paragraph says is really a big deal. And you don't do that in literature and, and you really don't do much of it in social studies, but it's central in science.

Something that's been slightly odd to me is that despite all of the talk about the science of reading, the field hasn't really talked a lot about disciplinary literacy as an element. How would you describe how it fits in?

[The term] has largely been about phonics and decoding and things like that—that's the way the public has heard it. That's what the policymakers and the media folks have talked about. And that's legitimate [though] you will get continuous pushback from the field saying, no, no, no, there's a lot more to it.

I'd say we're at a fairly early stage in disciplinary literacy when it comes to, do you have a lot of studies showing that if you teach this, kids achieve more? And I can say we have some. Twenty years ago, I couldn't say that. Now I can say we have some, and we still need more. We still even need more of the kind of curricular study that [my wife and co-researcher Cynthia Shanahan] and I were doing of figuring out what constitutes how a historian reads or how somebody reads in any of the fields. But the fact is we need more of that. ... I'd be a lot more comfortable if there was a lot more of it. So it's a continuum, I guess we could say.

The reading tools that are used by experts in one discipline do not always translate well to others. In literature, for example, considering the author is often important, but not in scientific analysis. Can you say a little bit more about these differences?

It's a nice reflection of, gee, here's a skill set of skills you never use when you read science. And you always use it when you read history, and you sometimes use it when you read literature, but it depends which college you went to and when you studied there and which professor you worked with.

And what it suggests, of course, is if I used some of those strategies that are about getting at the author's perspective, that could improve my reading of history, but it might actually do bad things to my reading of mathematics or science.

General strategies can help kids to remember the text. But the fact is kids can learn those things pretty quickly, those kinds of skills. And there are a lot of other things that go on in reading comprehension that we don't spend much time on; language would be one. You mentioned vocabulary. That's the one where we do invest a little bit. Not always well, but we do invest there. But showing kids how to break down a complicated sentence so that they can understand it, teaching kids how to make cohesive connections across a text, that's really important. Teaching kids how to use structure to understand what the author's getting at, and so on.

So we definitely want to teach some of those language skills that are really not linked to a particular discipline. And we want to teach kids some of those general study skills kind of strategies because they do help you to remember the information. And that's not unimportant, but certainly by middle school and possibly upper elementary, we should be teaching kids that different kinds of texts are written for a different purpose, and they carry meaning in a different way.

Do you have suggestions about how a principal or a school team might approach this problem?

In elementary, you want to get all the teachers together. In secondary, when it comes to disciplinary literacy, you want to get departments together. And the issue [to ask] about is: When did you start to find science hard to read? And what did you do?

What you're going find out is a lot of times, in any field, people are not necessarily super conscious of how they're reading because they read the way they do. ... They don't have any sense that somebody else is doing it differently. And so the first thing that I want them to do is think about how they actually read what it is that they do.

I actually got to co-teach a high school class with a [laboratory] scientist. And we did a lesson together where, we had the kids actually looking at the graphic and, there were six or seven graphics in this chapter, and trying to put them together with the facts that were stated in the text. And man, the kids were just blown away that nobody had ever shown them how to do that kind of thing.

In fields like English, where the literature teacher really might know the difference between New Criticism and more author-centered reading you can get that discussion going in the teacher's lounge and, and then ask, what do the kids know about that?

Teachers are generous. Teachers care about kids. They want to share that kind of stuff so that's really where you can win that.

[The core question is]: When those texts were hard, what did you do? And then the follow up question is: Have you ever shared that with your students? And the answer is almost always, say 90-some-percent of the time, 'well, no, should I?'

[And then]: Would you be willing to show these kids how they could get into it? ■

Published March 28, 2024

What's Missing From States' Reading Laws? The Role of Content Knowledge

By Stephen Sawchuk

The Image Bank/Getty

Legislation aiming to push literacy instruction in schools more closely with research evidence continues to flow fast and hard. Some 17 states passed new policies last year alone—and more are on the runway for 2024.

Now, several researchers are highlighting what they say is largely lacking from these laws: The central role of content knowledge in reading comprehension.

In a new statement, the Knowledge Matters Campaign, which offers tools and other support for educators shifting their reading practices, urges lawmakers to explicitly address content as they draft reading legislation.

"Prioritizing the acquisition of knowledge across a broad range of topics should be the focus of instruction and will require high-quality curricula in, and daily time devoted not just to English language arts, but also to science, social studies, and the arts," said the group's scientific advisory committee of leading reading researchers. "English/language arts curricula should be rich in content about the natural and social world, with topics sequenced to provide opportunities to build oral and academic language so that students can make meaning of the words and sentences they encounter in print."

Beyond the 'Big 5'

Nearly all of the recent state laws reference the five components of evidence-based reading detailed in the 2000 federally commissioned National Reading Panel report: phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, according to a 2023 analysis of the laws from the Albert Shanker Institute, a think tank affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers.

The problem, noted Susan Neuman, a professor of childhood education and literacy development at New York University who sits on the campaign's scientific advisory committee, is that comprehension is not a discrete task that can be taught alone.

"It's very particular to the text you're reading: You need the background knowledge," she said. "It's not a generic concept, like phonological awareness or some of the foundational skills. It changes according to the text and the content and you're going to be reading."

Researchers have known about the link between content knowledge and students' general reading ability for some time. Still, newer studies show that teaching students about content—and the vocabulary that underpins it—can help them develop a mental model that allows them to transfer this knowledge to new contexts.

Educators frequently struggle with how to put that knowledge into practice. Although publishers have put out new curricula specially designed to build content knowledge, research on their effectiveness is still developing, and only a handful of programs have been independently studied.

"The jury's still out on whether many of those curricula really do build knowledge," Neuman said.

Structuring legislation

Lawmakers can signal the importance of a carefully planned content sequence for students in writing their policies. Here's what she'd include:

A nod to the importance of starting early. Even as they learn how to decode words, students should be learning about the world, through read-alouds and discussions. In its statement, the Knowledge Matters Campaign notes that: "Comprehensive, coherent literacy instruction must begin in the earliest grades—preK and kindergarten—so that as students are learning to read, they are also building their reading comprehension."

Content knowledge and activation. Researchers tend to use the term "background knowledge" interchangeably with content knowledge. But in policy, using the term background knowledge could imply that kids either have it or don't when they come to school. Neuman stressed it's schools' job to teach content—and to do it thoughtfully, by asking them to activate that knowledge and explore what they learn through writing and class discussions.

"It's not a perfect term, but at least it conveys knowledge-building in a promotional way, not in an expectation that kids already have it," she said.

Underscoring integration of content. Laws should explicitly say that literacy development needs to be integrated with social studies, science, and the arts, Neuman recommended. Each of those disciplines contains its own important vocabulary and concepts, and the decades-long trend of squeezing out those areas has likely undermined efforts to improve reading. ■

RETURN TO PAGE 1

Published November 24, 2025

4 Tips for Supporting Older Struggling Readers, From Researchers and Experts

By Sarah Schwartz

iStock/Getty

Most intervention programs and research-to-practice guides for supporting struggling readers are aimed at elementary school children.

But many older readers have trouble with basic skills, too—and teachers often say they don't have the resources or knowledge base to support these students.

"It's not that teachers don't know their content," said Katie Keown, a literacy director at the nonprofit educational consulting group Student Achievement Partners, who works with districts to design literacy instruction. It's that secondary teachers are trained to be English/language arts specialists, she said, with the assumption that students will come to them knowing how to read. That's not always the case.

"People are desperate for things that will work," said Keown.

Education Week spoke with researchers and other experts for insight into how secondary teachers can support students with reading difficulties. Older students often have different needs than younger children, and as such, require a tailored approach, researchers say.

"Proficient reading at any age depends on the same underlying processes, but the way we teach those processes evolves with students," said Jessica Toste, an associate professor of special education at the University of Texas at Austin.

Read on for four guiding principles from experts.

1. Figure out where students' issues lie. Know that it might be at the word level

Students who are struggling with reading in middle and high school have usually had trouble with reading for years, said Kelly Williams, an associate professor of special education at the University of Georgia. As a result, teachers have a lot of data that can offer insights.

Interim assessments or end-of-year test scores can identify students who aren't at grade level. Then, diagnostic tests for those children can help educators pinpoint where their difficulties lie—whether with foundational skills like decoding words or with other components of reading like fluency or comprehension, Williams said.

Though many older struggling readers can read short, phonetically regular words like "cat" and "big," they might have trouble with more complex, multisyllabic words, researchers say.

Sounding out each letter and blending them together, the strategy students would have learned in early grades, works for these short words, said Toste. But students need to more flexibly apply their decoding skills to complex words like "extinction" or "photosynthesis," she said.

Reading longer words requires students to decode multiple word parts, each with their own vowel sound, and string those together. Struggling readers often need explicit, step-by-step instruction to make that leap.

Without it, "they often omit syllables and they disregard letter information," said Anita Archer, an educational consultant on explicit instruction and one of the authors of REWARDS, a reading and writing intervention for students in grades 4-12. "They often mispronounce prefixes, mispronounce suffixes, and most importantly, mispronounce vowels."

2. Rely on guides that compile evidence-based practices

Research-to-practice guides for supporting older readers outline strategies backed by evidence. The Institute of Education Sciences, part of the U.S. Department of Education, has published a guide for interventions for students in grades 4-9 highlighting four recommendations, with examples of how to do each in the classroom:

- Build students' decoding skills to read multisyllabic words;
- Engage students in fluency practice;
- Use reading-comprehension routines; and
- Give students guided opportunities to read challenging text.

Underpinning these suggestions is a focus on explicitly teaching techniques that students can apply when they're reading on their own. (IES has also published a more general

Organization	Type of offering	Research-based practices and materials
Institute of Education Sciences	Practice guides	Published by the U.S. Department of Education, two practice guides—one on reading interventions for students in grades 4-9, and another on improving adolescent literacy more generally—offer practical strategies teachers can use to support struggling readers, along with examples of what these strategies look like in the classroom.
The Reading League	Adolescent Reading Intervention Evaluation Guidelines	The nonprofit organization has published a guide that outlines both "non-negotiables" and "red flags" for evaluating reading interventions aimed at students in grades 4-12.
Project for Adolescent Literacy	Resources and strategies repository	This shareable, crowdsourced spreadsheet links to interventions, materials, and assessments that can be used with struggling adolescent readers. The list has been vetted by PAL, an educator-led group to support older students who are not reading at grade level.
The Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk	Brief on resources for improving low literacy levels in adolescents	Published by the Meadows Center at the University of Texas at Austin, this brief collects materials, research, and professional learning resources.

SOURCE: Education Week reporting

guide for supporting adolescent literacy.)

REWARDS, for example, Archer's program, teaches students how to read and spell common prefixes and suffixes and what they mean. It also introduces a routine for attacking unknown multisyllabic words, peeling off the prefix and suffix and decoding the base word.

"This is gradually faded into a covert strategy," Archer said, something they can use independently in their other classes. "We do not expect them to go into adulthood circling the vowel sounds."

3. Build both "world and word knowledge" to help students understand what they read

A lot of students can decode words but still struggle with reading. That alone underscores how phonics skills aren't the only key to better outcomes, said Ginger Collins, a professor in the school of Speech, Language, Hearing and Occupational Sciences at the University of Montana. "It's extremely important, but it doesn't end there."

In its recommendations for improving students' comprehension skills, the IES practice guide suggests teachers use several research-tested strategies: Give students frequent opportunities to check their understanding of a text, provide them with routines to determine the gist of a passage, and teach them to monitor their own comprehension. But it also instructs teachers to build students' "world and word knowledge."

Some of this instruction can be done through morphology, the study of word parts and their meanings, said Collins. Prefixes, suffixes, and words' Latin and Greek roots can offer clues to an unfamiliar word's definition.

More broadly, research has shown a positive connection between students' general background knowledge and their reading-comprehension abilities. Some studies have found that teaching children science or social studies content—and explicitly showing them how to apply those concepts in new contexts—can improve general reading comprehension.

4. Show students why improving their reading skills matters

Many reading interventions for older students are made of the same component parts as interventions for their younger peers, said Williams. But with older students, new wrinkles start to make the picture more difficult. Older students are generally less engaged in school than younger children, and teachers have to handle the feelings of embarrassment or defensiveness that can accompany needing extra help.

"We're doing explicit, systematic instruction with opportunities for guided practice and corrective feedback," she said. "But the motivation and engagement, this is kind of the trickier piece."

Students who have struggled to read for years can feel ashamed and try to hide the problem or stop participating in class altogether, teachers and researchers say.

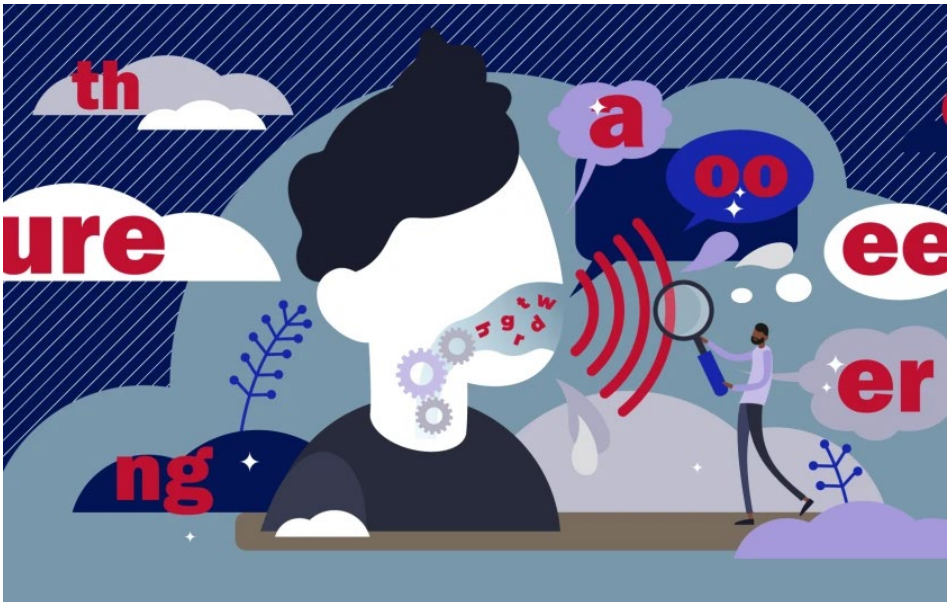
"You have to help them see the bigger picture," Williams said, demonstrating how they'll use what they're learning in reading interventions in their other classes, so they can see the practical use.

"That's one of the best ways we can support attention and motivation," said Student Achievement Partners' Keown. "We're telling them, 'You can do this work. You just need more tools to access the work.'" ■

Published February 09, 2024

How Much Time Should Teachers Spend on a Foundational Reading Skill? Research Offers Clues

By Sarah Schwartz



iStock/Getty Images + Education Week

A reading block in an elementary school classroom can feel like a carefully choreographed 120-minute dance.

Time is a finite resource, and it often falls to teachers to make decisions about how much instructional time to devote to the many interrelated components of reading. What's the dosage of each that will ensure kids get it?

A new study offers insight into that question for one key component of early reading development: phonemic awareness. It finds, in essence, that you can have too much of a good thing.

Phonemic awareness is the ability to identify and manipulate the individual sounds in words—to blend the sounds /c/, /a/, and /t/, into the word cat, for instance. It serves as a kind of springboard for reading and spelling by giving young children knowledge they can map onto written letters, aiding them in sounding out words.

Instruction in this skill is important. But at some point, students master this ability, and don't need further teaching. The new study, from a team at Texas A&M University, aimed to figure out where that point might be.

The researchers examined 16 experimental and quasi-experimental studies on phonemic awareness instruction, all conducted in small groups or one-on-one settings with students in grades pre-K-1. They found that the more time teachers spent, the better students became at the skill compared to a control group—but only up to a certain point: 10.2 hours total. Programs that spent longer on phonemic awareness instruction after that point showed diminishing returns.

Practice with this skill is crucial, the study concludes, but also that an "overemphasis" on phonemic awareness may not be beneficial, said Florina Erbeli, an assistant professor of educational psychology at Texas A&M and the lead author on the paper.

"We have to remember that phonemic awareness is not the goal of the whole instruction. The goal is to teach the students to read," she said. "Phonemic awareness instruction is just one of the steps that will bring us to kids starting to read and spell. ... After a while, you wouldn't expect a typical child to go on forever and ever needing this."

Research doesn't provide a 'magic number'

As the "science of reading" movement has spread across the country, more schools have taken up phonemic awareness instruction as part of their early literacy approach. A 2022 EdWeek Research Center survey found that about a quarter of preK-2 and special education teachers use Heggerty, an early literacy curriculum provider that offers popular daily phonemic awareness lessons.

The study is one of the first to provide research-based guidance on dosage for phonemic awareness. It comes at a time when questions about how to structure classroom time loom large in the science of reading movement.

While many states have passed new legislation mandating that schools use evidence-based practice, these laws and accompanying state guidance don't often come with a roadmap for structuring an effective literacy block. The lack of concrete instructions can leave some teachers feeling frustrated—wanting to change their practice, but not knowing exactly how. Some educators have offered examples of what their lessons look like.

But there's not one singular research-based schedule, in part because dosage is difficult to study, said Matt Burns, a professor of special education at the University of Florida who studies reading interventions. Burns was not involved with the Texas A&M study.

The same amount of cumulative time can have different effects depending on how it's divided up, he said. For example, 30 minutes once a week of practice with a skill might lead to different outcomes than 10 minutes three times a week. Many studies don't report this kind of detailed information about dosage. And then students' needs vary—some may need more practice and repetitions, and others fewer, Burns said.

Such differences should be considered in interpreting the study, Erbeli said.

"10.2 hours is not some magic number," she added. "We say in the paper that this number does not tell us anything about a particular class, a particular individual." Teachers should plan phonemic awareness instruction based on the needs of students in front of them, she said.

Still, this study can provide a useful guidepost, Burns said. "If you're spending more than [10.2 hours], take a look at your practice.

If you're spending much less than that, take a look at your practice."

Phonemic awareness: With or without letters?

The study also touches on a distinction that has become a source of debate in the reading field: Whether it's better to teach phonemic awareness orally, or alongside written letters.

Many teachers use materials that are designed for oral practice only. The teacher will say a word, and then ask students to segment the sounds within it, for example. But some researchers argue that having students look at the letters in a word as they practice this skill can reinforce their understanding—and some studies have shown that students' reading and spelling outcomes are better when phonemic awareness instruction includes letters.

In the Texas A&M study, the researchers found that phonemic awareness instruction with letters led to bigger returns over a longer period of time—the intervention groups continued to show better phonemic awareness skills than control groups after 16 hours of instruction over the course of the program. (These programs also spanned grades pre-K-1.)

That may be because phonemic awareness and decoding ability are reciprocal skills, Erbeli said. Seeing how sounds are connected to letters could help students manipulate sounds more precisely. ■

Decoding Threshold Quick Check

Use the two-part Decoding Threshold Quick Check to identify students who may need to strengthen their phonics and decoding skills to support fluency and comprehension development.

PART ONE

Oral Reading Fluency

First, determine each student's oral reading fluency level by calculating words correct per minute (WCPM).

1. Have each student read the 100-word passage aloud, including the title. You may listen to each student one-on-one, or have students record and upload their reading.
2. Read the "Directions to Students" out loud so students understand what they are being asked to do.
3. Time the reading. Start the timer when the student reads the first word of the title. Stop the timer after the student reads the last word of the passage.
4. As the student reads, note any errors (omitted or misread words). *If the student self-corrects an error, count it as correct.*
5. Calculate Words Correct per Minute (WCPM): (100 – # of errors) ÷ (# of seconds / 60)

You may stop the Quick Check if a student is clearly reading faster than 100 WCPM.

Generally speaking, a student who can read 100 WCPM has crossed the decoding threshold and likely will benefit from vocabulary and comprehension-focused intervention while continuing to strengthen fluency.

Students who are not yet reading at a rate of 100 WCPM may need foundational literacy intervention. These students should complete Part Two of the Quick Check, which includes an encoding (spelling) task.

Oral Reading Fluency Passage

Directions to Students: *I am going to listen to you read a short passage out loud. Read as smoothly and accurately as you can. Don't worry if you come across a tricky word—just do your best. If you get stuck, I'll wait a moment and then tell you the word so you can keep going. If you realize you made a mistake and fix it, that's great! Just keep going. When I say "Begin," start reading the passage out loud. You can start with the title. Ready? Okay, you can begin.*

Gold Rush!

"Gold Found in California!" That was the news spreading around the world in the spring of 1848. Thousands of people packed up their belongings. They traveled by steamship or stagecoach to the hills of California. Most had no experience working as miners. Few had the necessary tools. But all who showed up had a big dream: to find gold and get rich.
Over the next eleven years, miners would uncover millions of dollars in gold. But not everyone became rich. Many people grew tired of living in dirty, crowded camps and gave up mining and did other things.

PART TWO

Encoding (Spelling)

This portion of the Quick Check helps identify students with gaps in foundational phonics and decoding skills. It is designed for students scoring below 100 WCPM on the Oral Reading Fluency portion and can be administered to large groups, including the whole class.

1. Read the "Directions to Students" out loud so students understand what they are being asked to do.
2. As noted in the directions, have students number their papers from 1 to 20.
3. Read the script for each spelling word, and have students write the spelling word on their papers.
4. Collect the papers and score the number of words spelled correctly.

   Scoring and Instructional Guidance:

   - 16 – 20 correct: Student is likely to benefit from fluency work to strengthen automatic word recognition, along with comprehension-focused intervention.
   - 10-15 correct: Student may need support with vowel teams and syllabication before shifting to comprehension-focused intervention.
   - 0-9 correct: Student likely needs systematic phonics and decoding intervention.

Directions to Students: *We are going to do a quick spelling test. Please number your paper from 1 to 20. I am going to say a word, use it in a sentence, and repeat the word. Write the word as accurately as you can. If you are unsure, give it your best try. We won't go back to previous words, so listen carefully. When you're ready, I'll begin.*

1.	Chap. Cold, wintry weather can chap your lips. Chap.
2.	Thank. The man took time to thank the boy for raking the leaves. Thank.
3.	Stick. Put the marshmallow on the end of a stick to roast it over the fire. Stick.
4.	Slime. The snail left a trail of slime as it moved along the sidewalk. Slime.
5.	Tote. The teacher placed the stacks of papers to grade in her tote. Tote.
6.	Artist. The artist had paint spots on her apron. Artist.
7.	Porch. I like to sit on the front porch and enjoy a cup of tea. Porch.
8.	Stir. Stir the ingredients together before pouring the mixture into the pan. Stir.
9.	Snail. The snail moved slowly down the sidewalk. Snail.
10.	Hallway. The students walked quietly down the hallway. Hallway.
11.	Oath. The president takes an oath before starting his or her term. Oath.
12.	Flashlight. Don't forget to pack a flashlight for the camping trip. Flashlight.
13.	Sauce. Carson poured spaghetti sauce over his noodles. Sauce.
14.	Bought. Drake bought groceries for the week each Sunday. Bought.
15.	Brook. The brook ran through the forest. Brook.
16.	Spoonful. Add a spoonful of water to the mixture. Spoonful.
17.	Holiday. The winter holiday gives students a well-deserved break. Holiday.
18.	Maximum. The maximum amount is the most you can have. Maximum.
19.	Preoccupy. Thoughts of cake will preoccupy the birthday boy. Preoccupy.
20.	Dismantle. The mechanic needs to dismantle some parts of the car to repair it. Dismantle.

Oral Reading Fluency Passage

Gold Rush!

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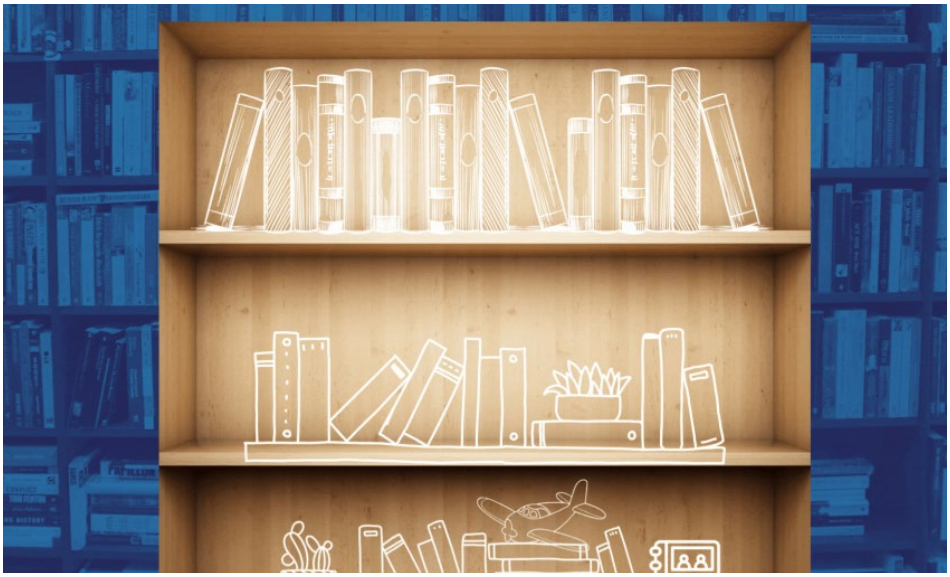
Over the next eleven years, miners would uncover millions of dollars in gold. But not everyone became rich. Many people grew tired of living in dirty, crowded camps and gave up mining and did other things.



Laura Baker/Education Week via canva

Published January 15, 2024

How to Build Students' Reading Stamina

By Stephen Sawchuk

Visited recently by one of his former students, Minnesota teacher Eric Kalenze was reminded of the push it took to get that student to read at length.

While teaching a 9th grade class, Kalenze had given a class a 25-page reading assignment, and the student's mother was concerned about whether her son would be able complete it within the demands of his individualized education program.

"His mom called and said, 'This isn't going to work,'" Kalenze recalled. "And I said, 'Would you like him to be able to read 25 pages in a sitting at some point in his life?' She said yes, of course."

That student ended up being one of Kalenze's best readers—hence his jubilant visit back to the classroom. But, teacher and student reminisced, it took some hard work to build his reading muscles to the place where he was routinely able to make it through nightly reading assignments.

It's an anecdote that gets at one of the truisms of reading comprehension: Just as a skilled hitter spends time at the batting cages and a skilled pianist must tickle the ivories, a skilled reader needs to read.

The work of reading comprehension is the work of a lifetime, dependent on exposing students to lots of content and vocabulary and to giving them the tools to make sense of complex sentences and language structure. It also means growing students' stamina—their ability to read at length. But this aspect of comprehension has not been studied nearly as much as others—even though the sheer amount of text students are expected to read can vary widely from classroom to classroom, beginning in the early grades.

"You have a 30-minute reading lesson. Are kids going to read 30 minutes or two? Is anyone going to monitor or inquire about that reading? And you also need to be doing something with the reading—interacting with the teacher about it, interacting with the other kids about it," noted Timothy Shanahan, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"Across a week or couple of weeks of lessons, reading should make up a significant part of the class, and students should be held accountable—it should be clear they really are doing the reading," he said.

New challenges to stamina—and new resources

The push to get kids to read more is hardly new. Since the advent of sustained silent reading and Drop Everything and Read, or DEAR, programs in the 1960s and 1970s, schools have tried various strategies to increase students' reading stamina.

The challenges persist today. And by most educators' accounts, they have been exacerbated by the rise of social media and smartphones. With their beeps, badges, and buzzes, smartphones are engineered to maintain users' attention—and to pull students' focus away from focusing on print. A recent survey of educators by the EdWeek Research Center found that more than half said that, in grades 3-8, students' reading stamina had declined precipitously since 2019.

"Stamina is another word for attention," said Doug Lemov, who trains teachers and whose book Reading Reconsidered aims to bring evidence-based reading practices into classrooms. "Reading is an exercise in attention, and attention is increasingly fragmented."

If sustaining students' attention to persist through text is a long-standing challenge, there are also new opportunities. A plethora of new materials, often called "knowledge-building curriculum," feature coherent content themes and text sets that can facilitate class discussion and give a framework for teachers to supply the academic vocabulary, background knowledge, and oral-language practice students need to make sense of texts.

Still, while these curricula do tend to present longer and more complex texts for discussion, they don't intrinsically build in the routines that help students persist through them.

"Each grade level's selections tend to be longer. That's not nothing, but to me, it isn't very instructive. It doesn't give much help" to either student or teacher, Shanahan said.

And although research has tied aspects of text, including its syntax, vocabulary, and length to how difficult it is to read, that's not quite the same thing as being able to focus on it for sustained periods of time, the educators note.

"It's not just complexity. I can look at a complex text all day long, but if I only read three pages at a shot, it's not building my stamina," said Kalenze, who teaches middle and high school at the FIT Academy Charter School in Apple Valley, Minn., and also leads curriculum, instruction, and evidence-based programs there.

No one curriculum can do everything to help build those routines, the educators said. Instead, teachers should include stamina-building exercises as part of the daily reading their students do. And it's best to start early. Here are some of their ideas.

Make time for reading and talking about shared texts at school

Lemov is a fan of the new knowledge-building curricula, but said they have to be

used a certain way to build stamina. Students should be reading together in class for sustained periods of time, working through complex syntax together, then discussing the texts' meaning, craft, and nuances, he said.

He often deploys a "reading cycle" to make this happen: a combination of teacher read-aloud, student read-aloud, and student silent reading—all on the same shared piece of text. Teachers might, for instance, read the first two paragraphs to model what expressive prosody—the stress and intonations in a language—sounds like; students then take turns reading aloud, practicing their fluent reading; then, students read the next portion of the text silently on their own.

"It's a sustained section of text, and we are practicing sustaining attention on it, with no break, for 20 minutes. Then we do a minute of writing and reflection and then we discuss it," Lemov said. "Should there be reading at home? Yeah, probably, but we should also read consistently in class, because that's when I can wire their habits for sustained attention."

This model notably differs from the choice-reading programs like DEAR so popular in schools a generation ago. For one, the reading-aloud piece means teachers ensure that students can decode the text on their own, and arrange supports as needed.

For another, working on a shared text opens opportunities for discussion, debate, and ultimately, community. Those opportunities are foreclosed when everyone is reading their own book.

"The communal aspect of this work is one of the unacknowledged things about why shared books are powerful. When it's funny and we're laughing together, you feel connected to the people in the room—also when it's stunning and memorable, or difficult," said Lemov. "I believe in book choice in independent reading, but when it gets kind of valorized, it can be an isolated experience that weirdly replicates the smartphone."

Increase the demands on students gradually

Old-school reading textbooks had plenty of flaws, but some features of them did help by gradually increasing the reading demand over time, Shanahan notes. They'd put one sentence on a page, then over time two sentences, then more, and so on through the course of a year. That same theory of action can still work today, especially as students are transitioning from decoding into reading.

For younger readers, teachers can gradually increase the number of sentences they're expected to handle; for older students, stamina can be grown via page counts. Either way, the main goal should be increasing the number of words read in a sitting.

Teachers can also set "stretch goals" every so often, using either a longer text or a shorter, more difficult one to build stamina, and they can also help kids internalize routines when they're struggling, Shanahan said.

"What happens if at one paragraph they do well and at two they have trouble? That's when you start working on what they might do when they get to that second paragraph," he said.

They could, for instance, write the briefest summary of the first paragraph to have that in mind before beginning on the second.

Consider using whole texts rather than excerpts

Some of the newer knowledge-building curricula prioritize whole texts, like complete poems, novels, plays, and articles. That stands in contrast to traditional reading programs, including what's known as basal readers—typically big tomes mostly comprised of excerpts.

The EdWeek Research Center, in a nationally representative sample of educators conducted last fall, found that fewer than 1 in 5—just 17 percent—said they relied primarily on whole texts to teach reading. Most favored all excerpts or a mix of whole texts and excerpts.

Though there isn't much empirical study on the topic either way, the experts Education Week interviewed favored whole texts. By their nature, whole texts tend to be richer and also gradually make more demands on the reader, who must juggle what's going on, chapter by chapter, against the work's larger layers, allusions, and significance. (Longer narrative nonfiction works much the same way.)

"You get to watch characters develop and do more knowledge-building through the things authors don't explain," said Kalenze, the Minnesota teacher. "With excerpts, I don't think you get cumulative gain in quite the same way. There's just no substitute for watching how a novelist works or how their arc builds. When understanding a work of art, you kind of have to follow everything the author is doing. With a snapshot, I don't see how that works."

Teaching a novel or a text of some length also makes it easier for teachers to gradually increase the reading load to stretch kids' reading stamina—from 10 to 20 to 30 pages over a unit—than trying to juggle a lot of shorter texts of varying levels of complexity.

Accountability matters

There are a few ways teachers can check that kids are successfully building their stamina. One is a simple formative assessment.

When reading a shared text together, teachers can stop and gauge understanding after a set period of time. If students are struggling to grasp the meaning by the end of the read, that may be a signal that a teacher needs to dial back slightly—or offer more supports on the text's vocabulary, morphological or language features, and other elements.

"If you have a six-paged article about something in the Civil War, for instance, have them read the six pages and then instead of doing some activity right away, quiz them—find out how well they did. Did they have a better understanding about what happened earlier in the article? Did the second half get harder? Maybe they weren't reading as carefully or maybe they didn't know how to use that information and the second part just got harder," Shanahan said.

Another tool useful in secondary school, when teachers expect students to do more reading at home, is the good old-fashioned pop quiz with a few basic questions about plot, characters, or key details. Kalenze uses these not only as a way to prompt kids to do their reading but also because they can prime the pump for understanding if a text is especially challenging.

"It becomes a platform to talk about what's going on in the chapter, and if it wasn't clear to you, it will enable our comprehension discussion," he said. "Without a daily accountability, it really adds up over time. When you start to attach this accountability, you hit a rhythm and you start to notice that all the kids have read. It forces you to do your homework, sit down for an hour, and read." ■

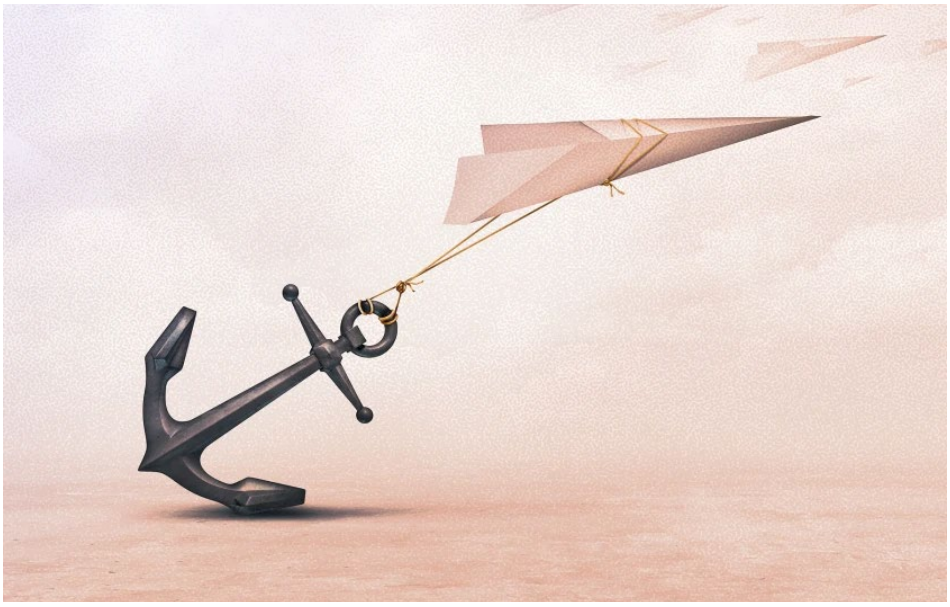
Additional Resource
View this article's charts

Published November 06, 2025

Students Need Anchors When They Read. How to Make Them Stick

What teaching Chinese language taught me about literacy instruction

By Haiyan Fan



iStock/Getty + Education Week

When Arkansas introduced mandatory statewide literacy training several years ago, I didn't expect much. Like many teachers, I assumed I'd click through this long series of videos, complete the quiz, and move on.

But I didn't.

I slowed down. I paused. I took notes, pages of notes.

This cognitive science-backed training struck a nerve—specifically, it reflected how many of our students struggle with spelling not because they lack understanding but because they haven't associated the written form with enough meaning to make the spelling stick.

They confuse their vs. there, your vs. you're, its vs. it's, or then vs. than. These aren't comprehension mistakes (a recent email from a former student, a native English speaker who is now a college senior, still surfaced this elementary error). They're what I call the "weak anchoring effect": Even fluent speakers may not fully register the written form and map it to meaning—a critical step for the brain to retrieve it reliably.

From a cognitive science perspective, language learning is an act of information processing. Every day, learners take in streams of auditory and visual input—sounds they hear and symbols they see—and must connect those inputs to meaning for long-term memory retrieval. Oral fluency in a first language grows through immersion; literacy, however, depends on deliberate instruction, where the art of teaching guides attention to what matters.

A beacon is a salient auditory or visual pattern that tethers sound and form in working memory. The teacher's role is first to sensitize learners to those useful patterns, then help learners anchor the forms to meaning for understanding to take place. This is where teaching becomes artistry: knowing where students are, knowing where they must go, and building memorable bridges—drawing on stories, pictures, clever mnemonics, sensory cues, emotions, or kinesthetic movements to help the form stick.

Anchoring isn't instant. Even after students notice a pattern, the written form can flicker before it stabilizes in long-term memory. Drift is normal before the anchor holds, which is why teachers need both patience and persistence, knowing science is on our side.

What does anchoring look like in practice?

Earlier in my career, when I taught middle school English in China, I used simple visual cues and creative storylines for these "tricky pairs." Students often learned here first, then there. I told them, "T is for to—from here to there."

Similarly, I showed them that their contains heir, meaning descendant—a low-hanging fruit students could easily remember in a playful sentence: "The king and queen's heir will one day sit on their throne."

Now, as a Chinese-language teacher in the United States, I saw the exact same phenomenon from the opposite direction. To type Chinese characters, students type in pinyin (the Romanized spelling of the sound) and then choose the correct character from a keyboard list. Because many words share identical pinyin only varying in verbal tones, wrong characters are often selected.

Here's an amusing yet revealing example of that from one of my students:

wǒ ài chī shuìguò (我爱吃睡过, I love eating slept-past)

wǒ ài chī shuǐguǒ (我爱吃水果, I love eating fruit)

Teachers' role here is the same: to sensitize students to beacons already present in the language. A visual comparison ties the characher 水 (water) to its pictographic origin, resembling flowing water. For 果 (fruit), 田 (look like a big apple) sits atop 木 (tree): a big fruit on a tree. And 睡 (sleep) combines the characters for 目 (eye) + 垂 (hang): eyes hanging heavy with drowsiness.

These examples show how securely literacy can "click and stick" when form is anchored to meaning.

These English spelling errors and Chinese character confusions may look worlds apart, but they are cognitive breadcrumbs pointing us toward one deeper truth: orthography (the correct written form of a word or character) needs to be anchored in meaning. Deliber-

ate instruction is a cost-effective, cognitively aligned way to steady literacy against drift—fastening form to meaning in a noisy open sea where fog blurs, waves toss, and cross-currents of distraction pull learners off course.

These effective, creative, low-cost moves often took less than five minutes to implement. Yet, too often, our systems reward the surface instead of the substance—through policies, curricula, and classroom formats alike.

Small-group rotations can shrink actual reading and writing minutes, leaving students busy but unanchored. Overloaded standards pack classrooms with micro-skills and checklists that dilute reinforcing forms. Digital "personalized" platforms fragment practice into screens and progress bars without strengthening meaning. Activity-heavy lessons look engaging but scatter attention away from steady exposure.

These approaches may serve certain purposes. But when they crowd out anchoring—the pillar of pedagogy—we mistake movement for learning.

What are the policy implications?

For English class, this means protecting the minutes when anchoring actually happens: meaningful cues, repeated exposure, and space for teacher creativity. It also means rethinking orthographic assessment.

Over the years, the pendulum has swung—from the weekly memorized spelling lists of my own schooling to approaches that assumed spelling would "take care of itself" through extensive reading. In my own teaching career, I've seen programs that emphasized reading fluency and creative expression but provided little explicit attention to the written form of words. Yet these goals aren't in conflict: spelling and reading reinforce one another. As students encounter words across meaningful texts, explicit attention to form helps the written system stabilize.

We need to remember a simple truth: Literacy and orthography still matter, even more so in today's high-tech, multimedia world. At the same time, knowing "beaconization" takes time, educators and parents must tolerate approximation while beacons stabilize, rather than demanding 100% spelling bee precision from the start.

Scaffolding assessment is the key: Teachers should reinforce vocabulary with recognition tasks, pattern choices, and word matching before expecting full recall. The goal is to hold learners accountable for orthographic skill by steadily strengthening anchoring until recall comes naturally.

The case for anchoring orthography in meaning grows stronger in a digital world where autocorrect and predictive text reduce attention to spelling. In Chinese, keyboard input lets students select characters by pinyin without seeing characters enough to remember. With voice dictation, learners receive even less visual reinforcement of the written form.

In English, texting shorthand often bypasses standard spelling (e.g., because → bc, tomorrow → tmr, through → thru), and learners may internalize these forms. In Chinese, internet slang replaces 这样子 ('like this') with the homophone 酱紫 ('soy-sauce purple'), a playful form that seriously confuses Chinese-language learners.

These conveniences aren't the enemy, but they raise the stakes: If we don't deliberately build beacons and anchors, the tide will carry learners farther from shore.

Literacy is navigation. Our students are at sea. The channel is crowded with bright objects that do not guide. Give them beacons to see. Give them anchors to hold. When we do, the drift subsides—and literacy reaches solid ground. ■

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Reading Fluency: The Neglected Key To Reading Success

For some readers, decoding does not automatically lead to comprehension

By Timothy Rasinski

The first post-pandemic National Assessment of Educational Progress results for reading achievement came out last year, and the results were dismal. The average reading achievement score for 13-year-olds is at the lowest level in the past 40 years! How can that be?

With the strong focus in recent years on teaching the code (i.e., phonics), it seems that reading achievement among students should be improving. However, that is not the case. Yes, the pandemic brought massive disruption to education, and that is probably part of it. But reading and teaching reading are complex, and when we focus primarily on one part of the reading-instruction puzzle, other important reading competencies (such as vocabulary, comprehension, motivation) are largely relegated to second-tier status.

One cliche I often hear is "readers can't comprehend if they can't decode the words." While not denying the essential role of phonics, it is also critical that we not neglect those other important competencies. Reading fluency is one of them, one that I have been exploring, researching, and writing about for close to 50 years.

My own initiation with fluency began as an intervention teacher in Elkhorn, Neb., in 1979 (I know, I'm old), where I worked with elementary students struggling with reading. I was able to help most students by focusing on words—phonics, spelling, and vocabulary. However, there was a significant number of students who did not seem to benefit much from such instruction. They could already decode words, though they did so at a remarkably slow pace with little expression or enthusiasm. It was clear in their reading that they simply did not enjoy or value reading because it was so painful for them. I clearly was not helping these children. What to do?

Fortunately for me, I was also working on my master's degree in reading education, and one of my professors had me read some recent articles on fluency, in particular "The Method of Repeated Readings" by Jay Samuels. Samuels reported that when students were asked to read a text more than once, not only did they improve their reading on the piece practiced, but there was also improvement that generalized to new texts never before read.

Since what I had been doing with these students was not working, I gave repeated readings a try. Lo and behold, these students who previously were making next-to-zero progress began to take off. In some cases, the improvement was close to spectacular. Best of all, these young students who previously did not see themselves as readers, now discovered that they could read as well as their more proficient classmates. They only needed to develop fluency through intentional practice.

Why does fluency matter? Since the report of the National Reading Panel in 2000, reading fluency—the ability to read the words in text accurately, effortlessly, and with appropriate expression and phrasing—has been identified as essential for reading success. As readers become automatic in their word recognition, they can devote their cognitive resources from word decoding to comprehension. Additionally, the meaningful expression readers embed in their reading (oral or silent) is evidence of reading for meaning. Scientific research has demonstrated that fluency is highly correlated with reading comprehension and overall reading achievement and that fluency-focused instruction leads to improvements in comprehension, the ultimate goal of reading. Moreover, research has also shown that significant numbers of students who struggle in reading are not sufficiently fluent.

In their 2021 and 2023 active view of reading, Nell Duke, Kelly Cartwright, and Matt Burns identify fluency as a bridging process to comprehension. Researchers have estimated that the effect size of the bridging processes, including vocabulary and morphology (understanding of meaningful word parts) as well as fluency, are substantially larger than the effect size for word decoding.

Yet, fluency continues to be neglected. Why?

First, and perhaps foremost, the obsessive focus on phonics leaves little room for fluency to be given consideration. But there are other reasons for the neglect as well. Fluency, largely associated with oral reading, is often wrongly seen as a reading competency important only in the primary grades. Unfortunately, we see fluency difficulties in middle and high school, too, yet, by then, there are often few teachers adequately versed in fluency instruction to provide effective intervention. Finally, reading fluency is often viewed as a competency that is taught after decoding is mastered. Research has shown that fluency instruction can be implemented simultaneously with phonics as early as 1st grade and that fluency and phonics instruction can support each other. For struggling readers in particular, we cannot

wait for them to master word decoding before moving on to fluency.

Given the current state of reading achievement in the United States, it seems to me that now is the time to make fluency an instructional priority in our reading curriculum. The great thing is that fluency can be nurtured in a number of authentic and relatively easy-to-implement ways.

Repeated reading is one approach. Rehearsing and performing texts, such as readers-theater scripts, poetry, song lyrics, speeches, and the like have been found to improve fluency, word recognition, and even comprehension. Those texts can easily draw on content students are already exploring in their disciplinary studies.

Another approach, assisted reading, also works. Students read a text while simultaneously hearing a fluent rendering of the same text, which can be a prerecorded version of the same text on a digital tablet, the reading of an adult classroom volunteer, or a group rendition in speech or song of a poem or other short text at the beginning of every school day.

With colleagues, I have developed two instructional protocols for increasing fluency (Fluency Development Lesson and Read Two Impress) that have been shown to improve reading outcomes. When students engage in repeated and assisted reading, they succeed.

In 1983, Richard Allington wrote that reading fluency, although critical for reading success, was a "neglected goal of the reading curriculum." Forty-plus years later, I fear that fluency continues to be neglected. If we really want to see significant improvements in reading outcomes for our students, we must embrace a more complete, complex, and scientific view of reading and reading instruction—including the competency of fluency. ■

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